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ABSTRACT

Institutional racism remains a powerful force in American society, a reflection of the fact that the white majority which enjoys the benefits of racism is unable to see the destruction that racism works on others. Institutional racism is characterized by a set of organizational procedures, formal or informal, woven into the operational structure of an institution. This racism is deeply ingrained in all aspects of American life, and is particularly manifest in our educational institutions, so that minorities are not provided with the training needed to compete effectively in the job market. Attempts at public school desegregation in New York City and Berkeley demonstrate that minority students are placed at a disadvantage in terms of school size and distance of transportation to integrated schools. IQ tests are another example of a discriminatory procedure that is masked as a scientific enterprise. Higher education reveals these same propensities and conveniently excuses itself from its responsibility toward understanding the needs and outlook of minority students. It is necessary that all educational institutions cease focusing on the student as a source of failure and focus instead on themselves and their role in institutional racism. (WP)

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INSTITUTIONAL RACISM:

A BARRIER TO EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

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Institutional Racism: A Barrier to Educational Change

Harold E. Dent, Ph.D.

One of the aims of this conference is to examine some of the reasons why those programs which were designed to bring about equality in the educational institution in this country have failed so miserably to accomplish or even approximate that goal. This discussion will focus specifically on institutional racism and its role in completely thwarting all efforts to bring about the changes most of us believe to be necessary. My comments are based solely on my perceptions of the institutional racism I've encountered, or that I've observed to operate so effectively to resist change.

I know many people will not accept my oversimplified definition of racism, nor will they understand my protrayal of the effects of racism. Most white Americans cannot understand racism because their experiences, their backgrounds and everything that influences their present existence will not permit them to see or understand it. They cannot see it because they reject as invalid any input they receive that is different from their reality or their world of experience. It is almost impossible for those who enjoy the benefits of racism to see the destruction that racism inflicts on others. Racism, specifically institutional racism, is a natural, accepted, integral part of the fibre of which this society and its institutions are made.

Let me try to point out exactly why it is so difficult for those who enjoy its benefits to recognize and understand the essence of racism. Grossly oversimplified, racism is an expression of an attitude or an act or a series of acts which subordinates a person or group because of race or color or ethnic background. In other words, racism is an act or acts which results in a put down of a person or group by a member or members of another racial group because of race. Institutional racism is a pattern of acts, a well-established set of organizational procedures, formal or informal, which are woven into the operational structure of the organization or institution which subordinates a person or group because of race. Interestingly, one does not have to consciously desire to function in a racist manner, but merely in the process of following established organizational policies will manifest racist behavior. (All future mention of the term racism in this discussion will refer to institutional racism.)

A clear example of institutional racism and how it pays off for white America is seen in the typical employment situation. This occurs in educational institutions as often as it occurs in other areas. In recent years there has been a conscious effort by government and industry to increase minority hiring. But employers have run into the problem of not finding enough minorities who meet the established job qualifications.

Racism enters the picture when one examines why minorities are not adequately prepared. They have been denied equal access to educational and training opportunities which would have prepared them to compete effectively. This represents a direct economic payoff for the white worker in this situation because untrained minorities present less competition for employment. Racism is such a natural and integral part of the fibre of this society that there are times when the victims are unaware they have been victimized. This should not be interpreted to mean that racism is a subtlety or a con. This is to emphasize the fact that racism is a natural, well established well accepted social phenomenon in these United States.

Institutional racism is also deeply ingrained in moral principles, ethical practices and in the traditions of every institution of this country. It is a completely self-perpetuating systmm programmed to resist change and reject all efforts to alter the predetermined payoffs for the dominant segment of soceity. The inherent nature of the racism is manifest in our educational institutions in such a way that it will not permit change designed to produce payoffs for minorities. Educational equality cannot be achieved until the entire system is reprogrammed to distribute the payoffs equitably among minorities as well as whites. By educational equality is meant equal access to educational opportunities, equality of conditions and facilities in which educational programs operate, and unbiased resources, e.g., texts books, curriculum, screening devices,

teachers, etc. As long as whites enjoy the advantages of greater job opportunities and greater economic security than minorities as a result of these differences in the quality of educational services, all of the conscious efforts at educational reform by even the most well meaning of us are doomed to failure. It is unrealistic to expect those who are presently enjoying these payoffs to willingly give up even a portion of them in order to bring about the better life for all.

A significant aspect of institutional racism is the necessity to maintain control over the factors that influence the payoffs. White dominated school boards, governmental agencies and communities are intensely threatened by efforts to wrest from them the control that could bring about change and produce payoffs for minorities. In an article in the Harvard Review (1971), Mrs. Annie Stein described the "strategies for failure" employed by those in control of the New York City schools who were obviously unwilling to relinquish that control to minority communities. In NYC a parent movement for integration began shortly after the historic Supreme Court decision of 1954. The parents recognized that their children, who were attending segregated Black and Puerto Rican schools, were not learning basic academic skills. Yet, students in the all white schools, in some instances as close as a mile away, were doing well academically. This stirred the parents to press for integration of the N.Y. public schools. The administration and the Board of Education of New York City schools, in an attempt to avoid

the potential (though unreal) threat that integration posed for white children, were willing to make promises to minority parents in the form of a massive program of new school construction. Minority parents demanded the new schools be placed in the fringe areas and that the zones for these new schools be established so as to yield a 50/50 distribution of minority and white students. Although these promises were made they were not fulfilled. What actually happened was that many of the new schools were constructed in areas where it was not possible to create racial balance. When new schools were placed in fringe areas the boundaries were gerrymandered to create new racially segregated schools. Mrs. Stein reported that before the massive school construction program began in 1955 fifty-two schools in New York City were segregated. In 1966 there were two hundred one segregated schools in New York City. Equally as devastating to minority children is the fact that in 1960 forty per cent of the Black and Puerto Rican students in New York attended segregated schools. In 1967 more than half of the Black and Puerto Rican students in New York attended segregated schools. In 1967 more than half of the Black and Puerto Rican students were in segregated schools.

Here in Berkeley, which prides itself as being an enlightened, progressive community, the effects of institutional racism can be seen very clearly when one examines the locations of the elementary schools and the ethnic distribution of the population of Berkeley. For those unfamiliar with the demography

of this city, the concentration of Blacks, Chicanos and people of low income is in the flatlands of West Berkeley, while the majority of whites live in the Berkeley hills. In 1969 when Berkeley "voluntarily" embarked on a program to desegrate the schools, it was agreed that all students in the district from Kindergarten through the sixth grade would be bused to school at some time in their young academic careers. But the plan that was finally adopted designated all schools in the Berkeley hills as K-3 schools. That plan also assigned the 4-6 grades to schools in the flatlands. This was consistent with the agreement that all K-6 students would be bused at some time in the first six grades of school. But what it really meant was that Black and Chicano children would ride the buses during their K-3 years and white children didn't have to board buses until they reached the fourth grade.

To some this may appear to be an equitable solution to a difficult problem. But it was a painful solution for the parents of Black and Chicano children. They recognized that they had to allow their children to ride the buses during the earliest years of school, if there was to be any semblence of integration in Berkeley. Advocates of neighborhood schools (then and now) insist that it is to the child's advantage to attend school as close to his home as possible. White parents in Berkeley insisted on this while ignoring the fact that if it were true for their children it was equally true for minority children. The public reasons offered to justify the decision to

place K-3 grades in the hill schools was that the hill schools were small (average capacity 300) and that it was advantageous to children to start their education in small settings.

The newly assigned 4-6 schools, all located in the flatlands, had average capacities of 900 plus. It must be kept in mind that all schools involved had previously been K-6 schools. If the inherent nature of institutional racism in this situation is not evident to the reader, I shall spell it out. If the neighborhood school concept and the philosophy that children benefit most by starting their educational experiences in small, intimate settings are valid, then why were all the K-6 schools in the flatlands constructed with student capacities of 900 or more? It should be noted that the newest fo the flatland schools was the largest of all with a student capacity of over a thousand.

Racism exists at every level of the educational institutions in this country from the legislative and governmental levels to the district and community levels and into the classroom. To begin with legislature provides funding for governmentally designed programs that have victimized and stigmatized minority students for years. Often on the advice of governmental experts and other professionals, the legislature endorses and sometimes requires the application of racially-biased selection procedures as a way for school districts to acquire additional money to finance schools. Until 1973 the state of California provided additional funds to local school districts for identifying the

so called educably mentally-retarded (EMR) students (EMR) students and segregating them in special classes. In principle this is an admirable thing to do because it is based on the assumption that these students will receive special attention and special instruction which will enable them to function at (assumed) optimum capacity. But it became clear to many experts in the field of special education some years ago that special classes did not necessarily serve the special needs of the students (See a recent review by Ferrald, 1973). Special education classes were and are special only because they remove from the regular classes the most disruptive students who are the least responsive (regardless of ability) to the standard academic approaches used in the regular classroom. Examination of the EMR population in the state of California (and throughout the nation) reveals that the students most likely to be placed in these classes are invariably active, aggressive male students, Black and Chicano.

It has been widely publicized that at least seventy-five per cent of the Black and Chicano children in classes for the educably mentally retarded in the state of California are inappropriately placed in these classes (Mercer, 1973). This is a direct result of the requirement that prospective candidates for these classes be administered a standard individual IQ test. Although eminent psychologists have stated and evidence clearly indicates that IQ tests (and standard tests of achievement) are culturally biased and systemically underestimate the abilities

of Black and Chicano students (Albee, 1969; Green, 1972), they are still being required and used on minority children. Exactly why and how IQ and achievement tests are culturally biased is seldom, if ever, reported in psychology books or in the widely read professional journals. Occasionally this information might appear in one of the more esoteric psychological journals or monographs, the ones few psychologists read. You will seldom see in print how the selection of the items that comprise these tests are biased in content and/or due to the sampling procedures used to determine which items are retained and which ones are discarded. If you examine the content of items on an IQ test you will never find items that tap the experiences of people who are culturally different from the white middle class model. I was first struck by this appalling situation when I was administering IQ tests to children in Hawaii who had not had the opportunity to leave the islands. One of the items on the Wechsler IQ test for children is, "What is the thing to do if you see a train approaching a broken track?" THERE ARE NO TRAINS IN HAWAII!!! Should a child be penalized for not providing a scoreable response to a question that poses a situation he has had no opportunity to experience? Is it fair to ask a ghetto child, how would he find his way out of a forest? Is it surprising that an Indian child from a reservation would not give the appropriate answer to the question, "Why is it better to pay bills by check than by cash?" Or worse yet, "Who discovered America?" These are but a few examples of why IQ tests are

culturally-biased and why they systematically underestimate the abilities of minority children. The result of the use of culturally-biased IQ tests is that a disproportionately large number of Black and Chicano children are inappropriately placed in special education classes for the educably mentally-retarded. For example, in 1970 the Black student population in the state of California made up 9 per cent of the total student population, yet Blacks comprised 27 per cent of the population of the EMR classes.

The California State Legislature and the California State Department of Public Instruction allow this blatant racist practice to continually victimize thousands of minority children in spite of the fact that a Federal Judge, Robert Peckham, has rendered a decision that this practice clearly violates the civil rights of the children so placed (Larry P. vs Riles 1972). Likewise a similar requirement that a child being considered for placement in the state programs for the educably gifted be subjected to a standard individual IQ test denies thousands of gifted minority students the opportunity to benefit from these programs. Again, it is the systematic bias of the tests which underestimates the abilities of Black and Chicano students, thus denying them admission to these programs. Black and Chicano students combined make up 25 per cent of the student population throughout California, yet together they comprise less than 3 per cent of the students in the state-supported programs for the mentally gifted.

One cannot ignore the importance of economics in any discussion of racism, for in many instances it is the economic incentive that motivates change or the resistance to change. In the case of standard IQ tests and standard tests of academic achievement, there is no monetary incentive for test makers to develop appropriate measures when they can continue to reap substantial financial rewards from continued sales of their instruments. Test makers have been successful by blaming the victimization of minority children on the misuses of the tests rather than investing the necessary funds in the development of instruments that accurately assess the skills and abilities of minority students. So long as the California State Legislature and the State Department of Public Instruction and local districts maintain their requirements that existing standard tests be administered as a means of assessing the academic progress and intellectual abilities of minority as well as white students, test makers will continue to produce the same biased instruments without concern for the destructive effects they have on minority children.

The racism that prevents effective educational reform is not limited to the public educational arena. The colleges and universities contribute substantially to the problem as well, for it is there that teachers and public school administrators, psychologists, etc. get their training. Little, if anything is being done at the college and university level to adequately prepare professionals for the job of teaching or relating to minority children. In some teacher training programs lip-

service is being paid to this task, but without real recognition of the seriousness of the task or the significance of the role teachers play in the lives of the students they effect. Universities and colleges take no responsibility for insuring the competencies of the people they train and likewise public school teachers refuse to be held accountable for the progress or lack of progress of their students. In spite of the cries of protest and the years of mounting criticism about the conflict between the white middle-class values of teachers and the values of the students whose backgrounds are different from that of the teacher, training programs do little to prepare teachers to overcome this basic problem. If anything they tend to exacerbate the problem rather than reduce it. All too often a minority student entering college or university finds it necessary to acquire the values of his mentors in order to successfully maneuver his way through the system. When he enters a classroom he perceives and reacts to minority children in much the same way as others who are steeped in the values of the dominant cultural group.

Little is being done to counterbalance the cultural myths or develop attitudes which respect the differences between cultural groups. The myth of the deficit model and the myths associated with such labels as "culturally deprived" and "culturally disadvantaged" provide comfortable cop-outs for teachers who have failed to teach minority students. It is an

acceptable justification for avoiding responsibility and accountability. Student failure must be recognized as teacher-failure, school-failure, and system-failure.

The faculties of the major institutions of higher education with which I am familiar want to stay sheltered in the campuses while they try to encourage students to get out into communities where the action is. College students, like elementary school students, need role models. They (college students) need to learn there is more to relating to minority communities than gathering data for a research project that will result in a publication and points toward promotion for a faculty member. They need to learn that professionals can relate to minority communities by listening, to hear from that community what their problems and priorities are; not by telling the community what it should do, what its problems and needs might be. They need to learn that (minority) parents have a right to be involved in the educational process and programs just as white parents. It does not matter whether they speak English fluently or are not available for conferences at the convenience of the teacher. It is of course difficult for white faculties who themselves know little of the Black or Chicano or Asian experience to train others to see how these different cultural experiences influence the lives and functioning of people.

Academia has been even more effective than industry in using the cop-out that qualified minorities are not available. But the reason for this situation, if it exists, should be obvious. However, when experienced, qualified minorities are

available they are seldom hired at a level comparable to whites with the same qualifications. In rare but highly publicized instances minorities are brought in to be high visibility niggers, but are not given authority and power comparable to the position. More often than not minorities are brought into universities on soft money and when the grant terminates so does the minority faculty.

Unfortunately colleges and universities are themselves monuments which have built into their structure the same institutional racism as any other institution. The hiring, promotion, admission and scholarship policies are clear examples of this appalling situation.

These comments and observations provide only superficial survey of the most obvious impediments that institutional racism imposes on efforts to bring about educational change. This discussion was not intended to be a pessimist's perception of futility. On the contrary it was intended to point out the necessity to focus future efforts on the basic issue of racism in all its ramifications (a few of which were identified in this discussion). It is the firm conviction of this writer that educators stop focusing on the student as a source of failure and focus on the educational and social systems and the payoffs reaped by those in control of these institutions.

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